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JOHN THE BAPTIST AS FORERUNNER

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By the ordinary, uncritical reading of the New Testament Scriptures one gets a very imperfect and one-sided view of John the Baptist. Unless allowance is made for the purpose of the writers, one is led not only to underrate the independence of John's personality and work and the profound influence which his propaganda exerted in general upon the people of his time, but even to overlook entirely John's real attitude toward Jesus and the effect which it had upon the early Christian church.

It is not at all strange that this should be so, for of course John is a person of secondary importance to New Testament writers. Their aim is to exalt *Jesus*, to defend *his* claim to faith, and to win others thereto. Under the circumstances, the strange thing is that they should have preserved at all some of the facts which they furnish regarding John.

It is the purpose of this article to examine the New Testament material regarding the Baptist. It will be found that there are strong grounds for assigning him a function very different from that of the forerunner of Jesus, which was the capacity in which the gospel writers grew more and more to view him.

In discussing this material, it will be assumed (*a*) that Mark is the earliest of the four canonical gospels; (*b*) that John is the latest; (*c*) that Matthew and Luke are chronologically intermediate between these two, but that they are much nearer to Mark than to John in point of development; and (*d*) that these intermediate gospels are practically independent of one another. These assumptions are so well attested, and their validity is so well recognized, that there is no need of sacrificing space here in their defense. But they could scarcely find better illustration than is furnished below.¹

¹ As to the first three assumptions, the growth of the ideas which we are to discuss takes the course Mark-Matthew-John, or Mark-Luke-John, when only Matthew or

1. John's ministry secured wide attention. This requires no explanation. In his day, any man who had news of the coming Messiah could not fail of at least a hearing. If, in addition, his ascetic appearance and his desert fare of carob beans and wild honey, his shaggy garments of camel's hide, and the leathern girdle which held them together, his supreme fearlessness and his scorching rebuke reminded irresistibly of the great Elijah,² whose return Malachi³ had promised "before the great and terrible day of Jehovah come," such a one would gain a mighty grip upon his hearers. This is precisely what John succeeded in doing, as will appear in detail.

We must not forget that the common people, at any rate, had nothing to lose and everything to gain from the reign of the Coming One. He, under God, was to "put down the mighty from their seats and exalt them of low degree." He was to throw off the hated Roman yoke and let the oppressed go free. And so multitudes came and listened to John in the desert.

The writers of the first three gospels state this fact unmistakably.⁴ Indeed, they seem to do this consciously and without reserve. As the Baptist was the harbinger of the Messiah, and as their beloved Master, Jesus, was the Messiah, large audiences to listen to John's messianic preaching were really a compliment to Jesus.

It is an interesting contrast which the Fourth Gospel presents at this point. The Fourth Gospel⁵ mentions neither multitudes nor preaching in connection with the Baptist. We shall not be surprised at this after proceeding a little farther.

2. All four of the gospels⁶ agree that John declared publicly, and in strong terms, his own inferiority to the coming Messiah. It was a

Luke is represented. As to the fourth, when Matthew and Luke are both involved, the growth follows through the gospels in one of the series Mark-Matthew-Luke-John, or Mark-Luke-Matthew-John. In other words, it is sometimes Matthew and sometimes Luke which represents the more advanced stage of development.

² Matt. 3:4; Mark 1:6. Cf. II Kings 1:1-8.

³ Mal. 4:5.

⁴ Matt. 3:5. Mark 1:5. Luke 3:7; 7:29.

⁵ In order to avoid the possibility of confusion as between John the Baptist and John the Evangelist, the Gospel of John will hereafter be referred to as the Fourth Gospel.

⁶ Matt. 3:11 f.; Mark 1:7 f.; Luke 3:16 f.; John 1:26 f. Cf. Acts 13:25.

rather strange thing for him to do. Not that there was anything strange in his feeling so. That was a psychological necessity. And there is no reason at all for doubt as to the genuineness of his feeling. It is because of that very genuineness that it could hardly have occurred to John to give utterance to his feeling, unless something external had called it out. The words have the sound of a disclaimer. Were they that?

Mark and Matthew do not tell us, but Luke and the Fourth Gospel do. Luke⁷ says that "all men" were reasoning in their hearts whether haply John was not himself the Messiah! If John knew this, no wonder that he uttered an indignant remonstrance straight out from his honest heart. But that thought of the people was a mighty testimony to John's personality. When we remember what it cost the apostolic church to secure messianic recognition for Jesus, we shall understand how significant it is that writers belonging to that church testify to the ease with which John the Baptist could have had it.

The Fourth Gospel⁸ gives a much more elaborate account, both of the circumstances of John's disclaimer and of its content. It represents the current idea of the people as mightily disturbing to the hierarchy at Jerusalem, and it declares that the latter appointed a special ecclesiastical committee, and sent it down to take John's denial officially. Moreover, the denial is far more comprehensive than in the Synoptic Gospels, for John is put on record as being neither the Christ, *nor Elijah, nor "that prophet" like unto Moses*; but only a voice, a "witness" to the Coming One.

That John should be represented as denying that he was Elijah is particularly noticeable. The Synoptic Gospels know nothing of this. On the contrary, Mark and Matthew⁹ tell us that John *was* the Elijah who was to come as the herald of the Messiah, and they give Jesus himself as their authority.¹⁰ But we shall find that this denial is quite characteristic of the Fourth Gospel, which endeavors

⁷ Luke 3:15.

⁸ John 1:19-24.

⁹ Matt. 11:14; 17:10-13; Mark 9:11 ff.

¹⁰ Cf. the language of John 5:35, taken from Eccles. 48:1.

at every opportunity to withhold from John all official status whatsoever, other than that of a "witness" to Jesus.¹¹

Such a development as this in the Christian accounts of John's denial seems significant. It looks as if the influence of John's cult was a powerful one during the period in which the gospels were being written, and that it had to be reckoned with in Christian apologetics. This point will receive additional support as we proceed.

3. There is no reason to suppose that John was a wonder-worker, or that he wished to be so considered. But not one of the Synoptic Gospels says he was not, or indeed says anything about it.¹² It is the Fourth Gospel¹³ only which does this, when it quotes people "beyond Jordan" as saying that "John indeed did no sign."

The contrast in this matter of "signs" is of course, as before, between John and Jesus. And that gospel which alone denies "signs" to John is the one which attaches greatest weight to the "signs" of Jesus.¹⁴ But how gratuitous and inane it would have been to contrast Jesus and John in this matter, except under the compulsion of a situation such as that just now suggested.

4. Again, Mark and Luke¹⁵ state that John preached his baptism of repentance "unto remission of sins." The phrase "unto remission of sins" calls for special attention. What does it mean in connection with John? Do these writers mean to admit that John's ministry, *independently of Jesus*, brought remission of sins to anyone? If they do, it is a very remarkable admission for them to make, for it is a direct negation of that natural and triumphant assertion of Peter before the Sanhedrin, when he said of Jesus, "For neither is there any other name under heaven, that is given among men, wherein we must

¹¹ Cf. John 1:8. The other gospels deny John's messiahship only by way of quotation. Cf. also John 5:33-36, where the comparatively small value of even the Baptist's "witness" is specifically emphasized.

¹² An apparent exception is Mark 6:14 f. But the meaning seems to be that Herod explained Jesus' "powers" by the assumption that John had *returned from the dead*. There is no reason for supposing that Herod drew his conclusion from any wonders previously performed by John *the man*.

¹³ John 10:41. Cf. 5:36; 15:24.

¹⁴ John 2:11, 23; 3:2; 4:54; 5:36; 6:2, 14, 26, 30; 7:31; 9:16; 10:32, 38; 11:47; 12:18, 37; 14:11; 15:24; 20:30.

¹⁵ Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3.

be saved.”¹⁶ Surely, if it be correct to suppose that these Christian writers attribute remission of sins to John’s ministry, independently of Jesus, then we must believe that they were compelled to do so by the overmastering force of tradition. It must be that multitudes still remembered the peace of soul which had come to them through obedience to John’s message. How indeed can it be known that sins have been remitted, except by such an experience, or by the testimony of those who have had it?

However, let us be quite sure as to the point at issue. It is not a question as to whether the Baptist forgave sins, or whether Mark or Luke or the Baptist thought he did. The point is, rather, that according to the alternative which we are now discussing, Mark and Luke mean that sins were forgiven *by God*, through John’s ministry, *in advance of the appearance of Jesus* upon the scene.

Of course there is the other alternative. Perhaps they are intending to say that John only prepared his penitent hearers so that they received remission later from Jesus (or at any rate through Jesus) when the latter came to grant it. However, if this is their meaning, they have taken a curiously blind and inadequate way of expressing it. And furthermore, if this alternative is correct, why do not the later gospels emphasize the idea? They are quick enough otherwise to seize upon every possible point of advantage for Jesus. Instead, they progressively push the whole matter into the background.

In Matthew,¹⁷ for example, the people still *confess* their sins, as in Mark, but nothing at all is said of “remission.” But surely if remission was secured for John’s converts only from Jesus, or even through him, as we are now supposing, that fact would seem to be a very helpful and desirable thing to use when a Christian writer is defending the messiahship of Jesus. It is worth noting that Luke himself also, who testifies *in the gospel* (his “former treatise”) of repentance “unto remission of sins,” as has been said, still speaks indeed of repentance in his second treatise¹⁸ when referring to the Baptist, but omits “remission” just as Matthew does.

Naturally, the Fourth Gospel goes still farther. Indeed, it reduces the content of John’s ministry to a minimum. Not only is nothing said of “remission,” but nothing is said about confession, nor yet

¹⁶ Acts 4:12.

¹⁷ Matt. 3:6.

¹⁸ Acts 13:24; 19:4.

about repentance, in connection with the ministry of the Baptist. As we saw above, even the preaching of John has gone, so that the only function which his ministry enjoys, aside from the testimony to Jesus, is the baptism with water. Perhaps this item could not yet be omitted. It is easy to see that the strength of the tradition which supported it may still have been too great, both among John's disciples, and, what is more to the point, among Christians also. However that may be, the retention of the baptism with water is made to serve a useful purpose. It gives point and significance to the assertion (made nowhere else) that Jesus did not baptize with water!¹⁹

It seems then that Mark and Luke did mean what they said, when they attributed remission of sins to John's ministry. But it seems also that they could not have appreciated how their remark would strike the church, bye and bye. In all likelihood, they had never thought the matter through. That appears not to have been done till later. It is an interesting process, this stripping of John for the supposed advantage of Jesus. One is irresistibly reminded of that reputed saying of the Baptist (which also, by the way, is found only in the Fourth Gospel), "He (Jesus) must increase, but I must decrease."²⁰ The saying was certainly true to fact, whether John ever said it *of Jesus* or not. And it must be admitted that the growth of tradition in the Christian church, as we observe it in the four gospels, ably assisted in making it true.

¹⁹ It may be urged that while this particular remark is found only in the latest gospel, it is after all only another way of stating a contrast between John and Jesus regarding baptism, which is just as clearly drawn in the Synoptic Gospels, and in the Acts also (Matt. 3:11 f.; Mark 1:7 f.; Luke 3:16 f.; Acts 1:5). But it should be noted that the Synoptic Gospels never suggest for a moment that the contrast between John's baptism with water and the greater baptism with the Holy Spirit was fulfilled during Jesus' earthly ministry, and the passage in the Acts expressly shows that it was not intended to be. The Fourth Gospel, on the contrary, represents it as actually having been fulfilled on the evening of the resurrection day! (John 20:22). So we have this situation: (a) the Synoptic Gospels do not feel called upon to deny that Jesus baptized with water, while the Fourth Gospel does. (b) The Synoptic Gospels appear to have no idea that Jesus baptized with the Holy Spirit, or was expected to do so, while on earth. The Fourth has just that idea, and mentions the occasion on which he did it. And so it is the Fourth Gospel again in which John and Jesus are put farthest apart. What a personage the Baptist must have been, to command such attention on the part of the church!

²⁰ John 3:30.

Before leaving the subject of remission of sins one other point should be noted. If anyone still thinks that Mark and Luke mean that remission was only prepared for under John, and was to be secured later through Jesus, he is bound to show that John's disciples became Christians when Jesus appeared. Otherwise, according to this view of the writers' intention, remission of sins for John's converts could have no meaning whatsoever. Did John's disciples thus become Christians? Did John recommend them to do that? If so, did he himself become the personal disciple of Jesus? Indeed, did John recognize Jesus as the Messiah at all, and did he bear testimony thereto? These are certainly fundamental questions. It will be convenient to consider the last of them first.

5. When Jesus appeared, did John recognize him, and give testimony to his messiahship? At this point we face a strange situation. Neither Mark nor Luke says that he did. Astounding silence, under the circumstances! John was certainly considered the forerunner of Jesus by both of these writers, and yet they do not mention that he recognized Jesus, or proclaimed him to be the Messiah! Why the silence? Couldn't they speak? From the viewpoint of any Christian writer, to recognize Jesus and to testify to him would be the most important of all functions in the ministry of Jesus' forerunner. Indeed, they would be his only functions of real importance.

The Christian community appears to have been aware of this, for presently the situation improves, though gradually. Recognition comes first, and later, the testimony. According to Matthew,²¹ John objects to baptizing Jesus because of his own unworthiness, and only consents to do so when he receives Jesus' direct command. It is to be noted that this is essentially a private recognition. There is no public proclamation by John, and there is no suggestion that anyone knew of the recognition at the time except Jesus himself.²²

²¹ Matt. 3:14 f.

²² It will be noted, of course, how the addition of this conversation by Matthew necessitates a recasting of the testimony of the Voice. In Mark and Luke, the Voice speaks to Jesus—"Thou art." In Matthew, where Jesus is already aware of his divinely appointed office, such an announcement directed to him would be superfluous. In Matthew, then, the Voice says, "This is." It is not Jesus who is addressed, but the bystanders.

It may be remarked in passing, that throughout this discussion emphasis is laid

Thus, not one of the Synoptic Gospels tells us that John testified publicly to Jesus, while two of them, including the oldest, do not even say that he recognized him. Quite on the contrary, we are told in Luke, and curiously enough under the circumstances in Matthew also, that the last thing which John did was to send disciples of his to Jesus, who by that time had attracted much attention, to ask if *he* were the Messiah, or whether the Messiah was still to come!

It is not until we turn to the Fourth Gospel that we find the Baptist bearing testimony publicly and in unmistakable terms to the official dignity of Jesus. "Yesterday," says the Baptist in effect, "I received the divinely appointed Sign of the Dove, and I know and declare yonder One to be the Lamb of God."²³

Perhaps there is an implication also²⁴ that this testimony by John was delivered to the committee from Jerusalem, along with the denial of his own personal messiahship.

Now let us disregard for a moment the perfect silence of the Synoptic Gospels as to John's public testimony to Jesus. Further, let us suppose that John's unfortunate question, of which they do tell us (and of which the Fourth Gospel naturally does not speak) was the outcome of imprisonment—the result of disordered nerves, brought on by loneliness. And let us assume, for the sake of argument, that the statement of the Fourth Gospel regarding public testimony is historic. What was obviously the next thing for the

upon the sort of pressure by which the growth of the gospel tradition was necessitated, and upon the direction which that growth took, rather than upon the particular garments in which the tradition became successively clothed. In the case before us, for example, it has been frequently pointed out that there is a striking parallelism between the colloquy of John and Jesus regarding the propriety of Jesus' submission to baptism, and a similar passage from the life of Gautama the Buddha.

²³ John 1:33 f. Cf. also vs. 15, though the text is uncertain. It is an interesting question whether the writers of the gospels, and particularly those of the later gospels, are themselves responsible for the progressive stages of development which appear in their records. A categorical answer to this question is probably impossible. It seems to the present writer more likely that each of the Synoptic Gospels gives us in the main a sort of photograph of the form in which the gospel tradition was held and told in its own time and environment. But it would be quite gratuitous on the other hand to deny that the photograph may often have been retouched, or even hand-illuminated, by the artist. Especially large concessions of this sort will have to be made to explain the record of the Fourth Gospel.

²⁴ John 5:33; cf. however John 3:28.

Baptist to do? What was that act for which his whole ministry had been simply a preparation, so far as John himself was concerned, and without which his "testimony" is fatally compromised? To make his testimony good, he should have taken his disciples, who indeed had been waiting for the signal ever since their baptism, and should have put himself and them at Jesus' orders in the way of personal discipleship. This he did not do. On the contrary, all four of the gospels assume that John went right on with his work, until Herod stopped him by imprisonment. More than that, the same gospel which asserts that John testified publicly to Jesus, tells us also that John carried on a sort of competition with the disciples of Jesus as to numerical success in the making of converts.²⁵ And finally, there is an intimation in two of the gospels²⁶ that John was not considered by the Christian community as a member of the kingdom of God—at any rate he is said to be less than the "lesser ones" therein. It would seem reasonably clear therefore that John did not join the band of Christian disciples. Hence it is difficult to believe that John recognized Jesus as the Messiah, and very much more difficult to believe that he testified publicly to his messiahship.

6. If John himself did not become Christian, perhaps his disciples did. Next to the Christian discipleship of John, that of even a portion of his disciples would have been a mightily welcome testimony to the messiahship of Jesus. It is just the sort of testimony, one would think, which Christian writers would have been glad to transmit, if they could. But there is no evidence in the three earliest gospels that a single one of John's disciples transferred allegiance to Jesus, or that John recommended them to do so. On the contrary, there is evidence that some of them did not.

For example, the messengers had not, whom John sent to Jesus, as mentioned above.²⁷ Otherwise they could have given John an answer of their own; and doubtless it would have been a shorter one, and perhaps more calculated to convince John, than the one Jesus himself gave.

²⁵ John 3:26; 4:1. Of course John had the losing end of the competition.

²⁶ Matt. 11:11b; Luke 7:28b. The words are found *in the mouth of Jesus*. Something further will be said of these passages below.

²⁷ Matt. 11:2-6; Luke 7:18-23.

Then again, as Matthew²⁸ tells us, there were those disciples of John who asked Jesus why he did not inculcate fasting on the part of his followers, as their master did, and likewise the Pharisees. These disciples had not been won over. Quite the contrary. They were comparing their own master with Jesus, much to the supposed disadvantage of the latter. It is true that Mark and Luke,²⁹ who narrate the same incident, do not represent the criticism as coming directly from John's disciples. But the *distinction* between the disciples of Jesus and those of John is just as sharply drawn in Mark and Luke as it is in Matthew. The critics, whoever they are, are quite as sure as in Matthew of the correctness of the conduct of John's disciples on the one hand in this matter of ceremonial, and of the reprehensible and unorthodox looseness of Jesus' disciples on the other.

When John had been beheaded, his disciples buried the body, according to Mark and Matthew.³⁰ Matthew adds that they came then and told Jesus, who withdrew at once to the desert. This additional clause of Matthew appears to enjoy the distinction of being the only passage in the Synoptic Gospels which suggests even friendliness toward Jesus on the part of John's disciples. Moreover, as Jesus' informants have evidently remained disciples of John thus far, and as there is no intimation that they followed Jesus even after the death of their master, Matthew's addition seems to imply no more than a friendly warning of a common danger.

The Fourth Gospel does not mention any of these incidents.

But there is still more evidence that John's disciples remained distinct and independent, and continued to "look for another." It is found in the facts regarding Apollos and certain others at Ephesus.³¹

Apollos belonged in Alexandria. We are told that he was a man of great power and eloquence. Although Jesus had been dead about twenty years already, Apollos was still arguing mightily from the Old

²⁸ Matt. 9:14-17.

²⁹ Mark 2:18-22; Luke 3:33-39.

³⁰ Mark 6:29; Matt. 14:12a.

³¹ Acts 18:24-19:7.

Testament Scriptures that the Messiah was coming!³² *He knew only the baptism of John*, we are told. He came over to Ephesus to preach there also, and being discovered by Priscilla and Aquila, who had been converted by Paul at Corinth, he was taken into their home. These Christians convinced him that Jesus was the very Messiah whom he had been expecting and preaching. Whereupon, with no abatement of power or eloquence, he began to preach from the Christian text, "*Jesus is the Messiah.*"

If John, twenty odd years before, had believed that Jesus was the Messiah and had said so, how did it happen that so zealous and intelligent a follower of his did not know of it? Apollos surely had not been living in a corner. He appears to have had no great difficulty in accepting the new truth or in adjusting himself quickly to it, when at last it was brought home to him.

It is clear that Apollos, in ignorance of Jesus' messiahship, had been trying to carry on the work of his master, John, as the herald of a Messiah *yet to come*, just as Paul was doing in those same days for *his* Master, the risen and glorified Jesus, who not only was the Messiah, but was soon to come a *second* time.

Presently, Apollos went over to Corinth to preach his Christian sermon there also. During his absence Paul came to Ephesus, and found about a dozen others who were adherents of the faith of John the Baptist. These received the same service from Paul which Apollos had enjoyed at the hands of Priscilla and Aquila.

Now it seems quite improbable that these dozen men had had any direct connection with Apollos. If they had been Apollos' converts, they certainly would have heard from him about Jesus also and about the gifts of the Spirit, just so soon as he himself came to know of them. The record shows clearly that they knew nothing of either. Apparently, they were as independent of Apollos at Ephesus as he had been of them at Alexandria.

These events occurred during the third missionary journey of Paul.

³² Quoting exactly, "he taught accurately the things concerning Jesus." But the sense of the whole passage makes it clear that he taught accurately the things concerning the *Messiah*, and that it was not Apollos as yet, but the writer of the Acts, for whom Jesus and the Messiah were synonymous terms.

It will be noticed that the only disciples of John who are mentioned in the Acts are these who became Christian converts. How many more of them may we suppose there were in those days, dispersed among the great world centers, who retained their primitive faith and so are not mentioned?³³

Just as the public testimony to Jesus' messiahship is found only in the Fourth Gospel, so also it is only in the Fourth Gospel that we find a statement that any disciples of John followed Jesus, *during the lifetime of the latter*. There we are told that "on the morrow," when the Baptist pointed a second time to Jesus as the Lamb of God, Andrew and one other who is not named, but who is usually identified with John the son of Zebedee, both of whom are said to have been disciples of the Baptist at the time, left John and followed Jesus.³⁴

Now as to this, we find in two of the earlier gospels, namely in Mark and Matthew,³⁵ a totally different account of what seems to have been considered by them the beginning of the Christian discipleship of Andrew and of John the son of Zebedee. According to these, the scene is the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and not the southern Jordan; the time is after the Baptist's ministry has been ended by imprisonment; Andrew does not come to Jesus first and then find his brother Simon; Jesus finds them both, and at the same time; and he finds not only them, but John and James also, and all are busily engaged in the earning of a livelihood, and, to all appearances at least, unattached.

Of course it would be futile to insist dogmatically that these divergent accounts of the beginning of the Christian discipleship of Andrew and John the son of Zebedee are totally irreconcilable. But one thing may fairly be said. If Mark and Matthew knew that John and Andrew had previously been the disciples of the Baptist, they missed a grand tribute to their Master when they omitted to mention the fact.

³³ From the fact that the later gospels feel most keenly the necessity of emphasizing in these positive ways John's inferiority to Jesus, one might be pardoned for the conjecture that the cult of John reached the point of its greatest strength in the period between the date of the composition of Mark and that of the Fourth Gospel.

³⁴ John 1:35 ff.

³⁵ Mark 1:16-20; Matt. 4:18-22.